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ABSTRACT

Government survey results reveal that large numbers of adults in the United States do not possess the minimal survival and life-coping skills necessary to function successfully in daily living. Since reading is the most basic of all life survival skills, a thematic reading that emphasized consumer survival was developed in the fall of 1977 at South Plains College, Levelland, Texas. The course stresses the following skills: reading for main ideas in articles that discuss basic rights under the law, how laws are made, and equal credit opportunities: reading to identify supporting details in insurance policies, loan disclosure documents, and employment contracts; skimming and scanning to pick up pertinent information in telephone books, dictionaries, and classified advertisements; reading written instructions on medicine labels, bank deposits, and job applications; and reading maps, graphs, and charts. The principle of evaluating written material for applicable knowledge, rather than pure factual recall, is stressed throughout all of the exercises. (MAI)

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READING FOR SURVIVAL
OR
How To Teach Your Students To Function In Society

In September of 1971, the United States Office of Education funded what is now known as the Adult Performance Level Project, or APL. The project was charged with two specific objectives. The first was to define adult literacy in terms of actual competencies performed in everyday life tasks. For too long literacy has been defined as the ability to read and write or to read on a certain grade level. Such definitions said nothing about an individual's ability to cope with the activities encountered in daily living. (1)

The second task assigned to the APL project was to assess these competencies for the adult (18-65 years) population of the continental United States. Surveys demonstrated that there are shockingly large numbers of adults in the population who function with difficulty. Results show that approximately 20% of the adults in the nation function with difficulty, or in other words, cannot function successfully with minimal survival and life

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coping skills. Still other persons are functional but not proficient in performing everyday life tasks. (2) In terms of numbers, then, we are talking about 20 to 50 million people.

The Educational Institution's Responsibility

Inherent in the purpose of junior and senior colleges is the task of providing the necessary educational experiences (opportunities) required by our graduates in order for them to function in society. We are finding that one of the most important and challenging jobs that we as post-secondary educators are facing is teaching our students how to get along in this world -- how to survive (in terms of "academic" survival and life survival skills). This challenge is even greater because of the open-door admissions policy under which so many colleges are now operating. Because of this policy, we are getting students that simply cannot "make it" in our society - even though they may have the necessary academic skills to get a degree.

This presentation is not intended to place blame for the deficiencies in life survival skills of our students, but rather it is intended to highlight some areas of instruction that can aid in the remediation of this problem. The need for this type of instruction is here, whether we like it or not; and the need will probably continue to grow. If we are going to be held accountable for the quality of education in our institutions, then we must attempt to offer courses that will enable our students to function proficiently in society.

The Approach at South Plains College

The attempt by South Plains College to provide instruction in the area of life survival skills is only in the formative stages. Instruction was initiated in the Fall of 1977 in a college reading skills class. Therefore, it must be pointed out that this is not a consumer education class. It is a thematic reading class emphasizing consumer survival.

Since reading is the most basic of all life survival skills, the most appropriate avenue from which to approach the subject is through reading. All consumer survival skills are based on one's ability to perform the basic reading skills; and when the course content of college developmental reading skills classes is examined, it is a comparatively simple matter to correlate it with basic life survival skills topics. Therefore, the remainder of this paper will be dealing with these survival skills and their correlation to reading skills as they are taught in the College Reading Skills class at South Plains College.

Reading for Main Ideas Of paramount importance to all readers (consumers) is the ability to read a piece of material and comprehend the main ideas. As far as life survival skills topics are concerned, any topic could be easily correlated to reading for main ideas. However, the topics chosen for use in this program were articles and paragraphs discussing basic rights under the law, how laws are made, and equal credit opportunities.

In order to facilitate feedback to the student concerning understanding and proficiency of both the reading skill and the survival topic, exercises were devised which tested the students

ability to correctly pick main ideas from the material dealing with survival topics. In other words, we are not testing simple recall of the material, but rather the student's ability to use the reading skill about which he has just learned.

An example of this is having the student read a paragraph dealing with basic rights under the law. Following the reading of this, the student is asked to pick from a group of statements the best main idea for what he has read and the statements which are too general, too specific, or irrelevant to the main idea. By doing this, the student not only learns how to pick main ideas; but he also thoroughly dissects the survival skill paragraph until understanding of the material is achieved.

The principle of evaluating for applicable knowledge rather than pure factual recall is carried throughout all the exercises. In the opinion of this writer, it is of little value for the students to show that they can remember what was read. What is of value is the student's ability to apply what was read.

Reading to Identify Supporting Details One area above many others that requires the consumer to read for details is the reading of insurance policies. This is often a frustrating experience for proficient readers so it is easy to understand how difficult it is for marginal readers. In developing exercises to illustrate the techniques of reading for details, excerpts from actual insurance policies were used. The exercises were based on involving the student in the identification of important details contained in the policies. Additionally, articles were used which describe various kinds of insurance that the consumer will pro-

bably be asked to purchase. The student is also asked to identify important details found in those articles.

Other examples of materials that can be correlated with detailed reading are loan disclosure documents and employment contracts. Exercises can be developed that are similar to those used for insurance policies that will stress application of the techniques of identifying important details rather than simple recall of the material read.

Skimming and Scanning Skimming and scanning are two reading skills that consumers are constantly required to use. For the person whose life survival skills are less than adequate, the need to use these skills may be a frustrating experience. The exercises that have been developed illustrating scanning involve having the student pick exact information from telephone books - including the yellow pages - dictionaries, and classified advertisements and then answer questions based on the information they found. For example, the student is asked to find the advertisement in the classified ads for a particular job. Based on what they found, they are asked to answer these questions. 1) What are the qualifications for the job? 2) How much does it pay? 3) Would you have to move to a different city in order to get the job?

The technique of skimming is illustrated by having the students skim consumer-related articles in order to pick main ideas. These articles deal with topics such as computer driver tests, wise grocery shopping, and matching personal characteristics with job characteristics. Upon completion of the skimming, thorough reading of the articles is required.

Following Written Directions The correlation of life survival skills to the reading skill of following written directions was simple. Our lives are filled with directions that must be read and followed. Some directions --like medicine labels-- can mean the difference between life or death, and our ability to apply those directions is literally a life surviving skill.

Correlating life survival skills to this reading skill also affords us the opportunity to delve into less dramatic areas, but none the less important activities. Those that we have emphasized, in addition to reading medicine labels, are writing personal checks, balancing check books, making bank deposits, and completing job applications.

In keeping with the philosophy of stressing applicable knowledge rather than factual recall, the exercises for this section are intended to allow the student to learn how to perform the survival skills discussed. For instance, a blank check along with directions for the completion of it are given to each student. The student is asked to complete the check by following the directions. Another example is completing job applications. Several different types of job applications are provided which the student is asked to complete just as if they were applying for the job.

Reading Maps, Graphs, and Charts The final reading skill that is used in this program is reading maps, graphs, and charts. Like so many other reading skills, it is easily correlated to life survival topics. The skills discussed are reading mass transportation schedules, reading city and road maps, and reading graphs describ-

ing several topics pertinent to consumer awareness of various economic conditions.

The exercises are of the usual type whereby the students are asked questions which, when correctly answered, indicate a proficiency in both the reading and survival skill. Examples of these are reading a city bus schedule and then answering questions concerning which bus should be taken to get from one place to another, or reading a road map and charting the shortest route from one point to another.

Summary

The intent of this paper has been to emphasize the critical importance of incorportating life survival skills into college developmental reading curricula. Our country has 20 to 50 million people who cannot function adequately in society because of deficiencies in their survival skills, and it has become the obligation of post-secondary educational institutions to provide educational opportunities which will assist individuals in becoming better equipped to function in society.

This paper has, at best, provided a very brief description of the correlation of life survival skills to reading skills and the types of exercises that can be used to provide feedback to students concerning their progress. This writer is confident that there are countless other reading and surviving skills that can be employed in this type of instruction. However, the author is equally confident that the examples cited in this paper are sufficient in that they illustrate what can be done to

aid students in this area.

Feedback from students who have completed the units has been encouraging. Of particular encouragement are the comments concerning the applied knowledge exercises. This writer is of the opinion that this approach will be the key to the future of this instruction. When students can see the usefulness of learning reading skills, the job of teaching those skills is also much easier.

In conclusion, it must again be pointed out that this instruction is only in the initial stages. Many additions and refinements are necessary, but this is a first step toward meeting an educational need that is here and growing. Ideally, this instruction should not be necessary on the college level, but it is. This is one attempt to satisfy it.

Selected References

1. _____. The Adult Performance Level Competency-Based High School Diploma Program. Unpublished Research Report. Texas Department of Human Resources, 1977.

2. Ibid., p. 1.